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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/FO AND NEA/FO; P FOR UNDERSECRETARY BURNS

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SUBJECT: IRAN, RUSSIA, LIBYA VIE FOR URANIUM IN SIERRA LEONE

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Classified By: Ambassador June Carter Perry for reasons 1.4 (b), (d), a
nd (e)

¶1. (S/NF) A single source reported that Russia, Iran, Libya, and others are competing for the mining rights to recently discovered uranium deposits in Kono, Sierra Leone, and that key local players have sent out feelers for the best international offer. The source fears that the Russian government would even stage a coup to assure control of the mining rights; while a coup is extreme, the presence of uranium, an active Iranian mission, a surprise (and still not fully explained) visit from Libyan President Qadhafi, and corrupt officials at the top of the Government hierarchy lend credence to his concerns.

¶2. (S/NF) An expatriate mining and business executive with nearly thirty years of experience in Sierra Leone approached interagency Embassy officers on January 30 to relate his concerns that uranium deposits in Kono (a region already famous for its diamonds) could be sold to hostile powers, including Russia, Iran and Libya. Emboffs had a subsequent meeting with the individual on February 10. The executive, married into a well-connected Sierra Leonean family, was approached by a long-time associate, Alexander Alexie (LNU), a Russian national. Alexie, claiming he was acting on behalf of the Russian government in the matter, wanted source's assistance in securing mining rights for the uranium via source's family connections, following a failure to secure them through regular GoSL channels.

¶3. (S/NF) According to the source, the uranium had been uncovered by the previous government, and though many expressed interest, failed for unknown reasons to move forward with a deal. Currently, the Secretary General of the Ministry of Mines, Alhaji Osman Boye Kamara, was blocking Russian attempts to secure the uranium concession. Kamara is reported to have close relationships with several senior politicians in the current APC government of Ernest Bai Koroma, including the Vice President. Alexie believed Kamara was blocking the deal in favor of other foreign interests. The source further alleged that the Russians considered securing the rights (and keep them out of Iranian hands) critical enough that they were exploring ways to stage a coup and replace Kamara with officials in the Ministry of Mines favorable to Russian interests. Allegedly, the Sierra Leonean Ambassador to Iran was already tasked by Kamara to obtain an Iranian offer for the rights; Alexie claimed such a deal would undercut Russian supplies of uranium to (and consequent leverage over) Iran, and allow Iran unfettered material and opportunities to refine uranium.

¶ 4. (S/NF) The source also reported that a Russian general had visited Sierra Leone to establish a coastal military presence that would be located downstream from the mining site (Note: Kono is over one hundred miles inland.) and allow surveillance of buying, selling, and smuggling activities in the area. Qadhafi's recent visit to Sierra Leone, which Quadhafi himself couldn't explain publicly (reftel A), was, according to the source, an attempt to insert himself into a controlling role in the bidding for the uranium concession.

¶ 5. (S/NF) Vice President Samuel Samsumana, a Kono native, and the Attorney General Abdul Serry-Kamal were also implicated in looking for foreign assistance, with Samsumana tasked by Kamara to approach the Chinese, and Serry-Kamal assigned to look into mining companies to do the digging. The source claimed his fears were confirmed when Serry-Kamal approached him independently and asked him to find someone to do the mining, though Serry-Kamal allegedly expressed concerns that the uranium might fall into the "wrong hands," including the Iranians, and is thus part of the process to prevent that from happening.

¶ 6. (S/NF) Bio Note: The Government of Iran upgraded its presence from a consulate to an embassy in mid-2008 and expanded their "community activities." The Ambassador is Dr. Nasrullah Maliki. He has been seen in close company with GoSL leaders, including Chief Justice Tejan Jalloh.

¶ 7. (S/NF) Comment: There is uranium in them their hills, and with the diamond trade continuing its decline due to a reduction on both supply and demand-sides, is likely being increasingly viewed as a huge revenue opportunity for the government. With the heavy reliance on foreign donors for direct budgetary support and the expected reduction in that support due to the global financial crisis and resultant decrease in available donor funds, exchange rate fluctuations, and a drop in remittances, the government is looking for quick, liquid solutions to its financial problems. This imperative for support furthers Sierra Leone's vulnerability to those with deep pockets and shallow scruples. Given the robust diplomatic relations with Iran, Libya, and China, a lucrative exchange of uranium for capital is increasingly becoming a certainty, rather than a possibility. Though Qadhafi's surprise visit actually seemed to vex the Sierra Leoneans, in contrast, Iran is shining in the spotlight of a strong public campaign surrounding their support of Islam throughout the country. As reported in reftel B, the Iranians work their diplomatic connections convincingly, but are not timid about engaging high-level government officials to further their own interests. A back-door deal with the Iranians to mine the uranium in Kono, a location with little international community penetration and effective policing, could be easily and clandestinely managed, from extraction to exportation. End comment.

PERRY